

Do Populists Win on Facebook?

The Engagement Premium of Populist Parties in Europe, 2010 to 2020

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Abstract

Do populist parties get more attention on Facebook than other parties, and is that true everywhere? I use 669,760 posts from 112 official party pages in 17 European countries, posted between January 2010 and September 2020, with 186,939 posts from 74 party leaders as a second sample. I classify parties as populist, far right or far left using the PopuList, an expert classification, year by year, and add vote shares and government membership from ParlGov. I compare each post with posts by other parties in the same country and month. A typical post by a populist party received about 2.5 times as many likes, comments, shares and reactions as a post by another party of the same size and government status. Populist radical left parties had the largest premium (about 5.4 times), populist radical right parties about 2.3 times and other populists about 1.5 times. I find no premium for far-left parties that are not populist, and no separate premium for Euroscepticism. The premium differs a lot between countries: it was large in Spain, the United Kingdom, Norway, Sweden, Hungary and France, and I cannot detect it in Slovenia, Luxembourg, Slovakia, Finland, Greece or Switzerland. Bigger audiences account for more than half of it. Populist pages had about 1.9 times the page likes of other parties with the same vote share, but at equal page size a premium of about 1.5 times remained. Populist posts drew a higher share of angry reactions (4.4% against 2.7% of interactions). I find no detectable change in the premium after Facebook's January 2018 News Feed change.

Keywords: populism; Facebook; social media engagement; political parties; Europe; PopuList; CrowdTangle

1 Introduction

Populist parties are said to be good at social media. The claim is common in commentary and it has a plausible logic. Populism sets a virtuous people against a corrupt elite (Mudde 2004), and platforms let parties speak to the people without the media gatekeepers they distrust (Engesser et al. 2017; Gerbaudo 2018). Engagement metrics reward emotional, negative and conflictual content (Rathje et al. 2021), which populists are thought to supply. Yet the comparative evidence is thinner than the claim. Many studies look at one party, one country or one campaign (Bobba 2019), at politicians rather than parties

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(Hameleers et al. 2021), or at the content of populist messages rather than at the attention parties receive (Ernst et al. 2017; Bene et al. 2022). We know less about whether populist parties as such received more engagement across many countries over a long period, how large the difference was, and where it came from.

I use posts from 112 official Facebook pages of national parties in 17 European countries from 2010 to 2020, collected through CrowdTangle in October 2020, with party leaders as a second sample. I classify parties with the PopuList (Rooduijn et al. 2024; The PopuList 2026), year by year, and add election results and government membership from ParlGov (Döring and Manow 2024). I ask six questions. **RQ1.** Do populist parties receive more engagement per post than other parties in the same country and month, and how much more? **RQ2.** Does the premium follow populism, or radicalism or Euroscepticism, which often come with it? **RQ3.** Is it the same across countries? **RQ4.** How much of it reflects bigger audiences rather than more engagement per follower, and is it angrier? **RQ5.** Is it different for populists in government? **RQ6.** Did it change over time, and in particular after Facebook’s January 2018 News Feed change, which internal documents later linked to angrier political content (Hagey and Horwitz 2021)?

My answers are as follows. There is a large premium: a populist party’s post received about 2.5 times the interactions of a post by another party of the same size and government status in the same country and month. It is largest for the populist radical left. I find no premium for far-left parties that are not populist and no separate premium for Euroscepticism, although these comparisons rest on few parties. The premium varies a great deal between countries: it is large in six, and I cannot detect it in the other six that allow a comparison. Bigger audiences account for more than half of it, and populist posts drew a larger share of angry reactions. The premium was smaller for populists in government, but the difference is not statistically significant and does not appear when the same party moves in or out of government. I find no detectable change after January 2018.

The paper extends my doctoral research on how parties use Facebook (Hotham 2021) and a series of recent preprints on British party pages, campaigns and online political attention (Hotham 2026c,e,d,b,a). Those papers studied one country. This one asks whether the patterns are European.

2 Background and expectations

Why populists might earn more engagement. Populism is a thin ideology that divides society into a pure people and a corrupt elite and claims to speak for the general will (Mudde 2004). Social media suit it: they allow direct contact with supporters, reward personal and emotional styles, and bypass media gatekeepers (Engesser et al. 2017; Gerbaudo 2018). Content analyses find populist communication more common on Facebook than on Twitter, and more common among parties at the extremes and in opposition (Ernst et al. 2017). Studies of engagement give a mixed picture. In 12 European countries, party posts with populist appeals and negativity drew more user engagement (Bene et al. 2022). A comparative study of politicians’ posts in several countries found that populist content as such did not raise engagement, but negativity, emotion and personal references did, and right-wing populist politicians were shared more regardless of content (Hameleers et al. 2021). More generally, posts about political out-groups drive engagement more than posts about in-groups (Rathje et al. 2021). My own work on Britain First found that outrage-laden posts were shared far more than others (Hotham 2026c).

Why the premium might vary. Populists who are challengers have the most to gain from bypassing media that treat them as outsiders, and challenger parties compete by raising issues the mainstream avoids

(De Vries and Hobolt 2020). Once in government a populist party becomes part of the establishment it attacks, and its posts may look more like those of any governing party. Where several populist parties compete, or where a populist party is itself the main party of government, attention may be spread across them. I therefore expect the premium to be larger for parties in opposition and to vary between party systems.

Audience or intensity. A party can get more interactions per post because more people follow it, or because each follower engages more. A larger following builds up over years, partly from past engagement and advertising; engagement per follower reflects how people respond to each post. I separate the two descriptively.

The 2018 News Feed change. In January 2018 Facebook changed its ranking to promote “meaningful social interactions”, giving more weight to comments, shares and reactions than to likes (Mosseri 2018). Internal documents later reported that political parties in Europe, including in Poland, told Facebook the change had pushed them towards more negative content (Hagey and Horwitz 2021). If the change rewarded populist content in particular, the premium should rise after January 2018.

3 Data

3.1 Pages and posts

The posts come from CrowdTangle, Facebook’s public-content tool, which I used to export the historical posts of saved lists of party and politician pages in October 2020. Each record is a post with its time, type, the number of page likes at the time of posting and counts of likes, comments, shares and, from February 2016, the reactions love, wow, haha, sad, angry and care. I define *interactions* as the sum of all of these. Page likes at posting, which I treat as the page’s audience, are recorded for almost no posts before 2015, for 22% of posts in 2015, 82% in 2016 and between 88% and 100% after that, so I use them only from 2016.

The exports covered parties and politicians in 20 European countries. I keep official national party pages as the main sample and the personal pages of party leaders as a second sample, and I drop pages of youth wings, regional branches, coalitions, fan pages, local politicians and non-party actors. I also drop four parties that never reached 2% of the vote nationally, since the PopuList does not classify parties below that threshold and their status would be unknown: the NPD in Germany, the UPR in France, and PACMA and EQUO in Spain. The one page of Alternative for Germany in the exports was its North Rhine-Westphalia branch, so I drop it rather than compare a regional page with national ones, and I drop a fan page supporting the Greek Communist Party. I keep posts from 1 January 2010 to 30 September 2020, the last full month in every export.

The main sample has 669,760 posts from 112 party pages in 17 countries, with about 515 million interactions. The leader sample has 186,939 posts from 74 leaders in 15 countries, including Belgium, Denmark and Latvia, for which I have leaders but not parties. Table 1 describes the party sample. Coverage is uneven: Spain, France and the United Kingdom have 12 or 13 party pages each, Switzerland and Romania three. In five countries (Germany, Ireland, Lithuania, Portugal and Romania) the exports contain no populist party page or no non-populist one, so these countries help estimate the other coefficients but not the populist premium, which rests on the 12 remaining countries and 24 populist pages. Important parties are missing from the exports, including the Finns Party, Chega, the national page of Alternative for Germany, the Slovak National Party, Independent Greeks, the German Social

Table 1. Party pages by country, January 2010 to September 2020. Medians are interactions per post.

Country	Party pages	Populist pages	Posts	Median, other parties	Median, populists	Leader pages
Finland	8	1	38,729	65	64	0
France	12	3	66,024	90	339	0
Germany	4	0	25,192	188		0
Greece	5	3	27,956	176	69	5
Hungary	7	2	78,024	201	969	6
Ireland	1	1	6,462		269	5
Lithuania	4	0	12,866	45		1
Luxembourg	7	1	17,834	16	19	1
Norway	8	1	33,566	174	736	7
Portugal	6	0	37,207	131		0
Romania	3	0	26,082	353		1
Slovakia	5	3	23,206	203	291	3
Slovenia	6	4	30,432	53	49	0
Spain	13	2	131,315	163	1,715	7
Sweden	8	1	33,942	274	2,500	7
Switzerland	3	1	9,453	44	171	3
United Kingdom	12	2	71,470	213	1,078	13
All	112	25	669,760	138	312	59

Notes: a page counts as populist if the PopuList classifies the party as populist in at least one year of the sample; the medians use the year-by-year classification. Ireland's one party page is Sinn Féin's. A further 15 leader pages come from Belgium (5), Denmark (8) and Latvia (2).

Democrats and Greens, and Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil; Appendix Table 3 lists them. Poland and Italy are not covered at all.

3.2 Classifying parties

I classify parties with version 4.0 of the PopuList, which uses country experts to classify European parties that won at least 2% of the vote or a seat in national elections since 1989 as populist, far right, far left and Eurosceptic (Rooduijn et al. 2024; The PopuList 2026). The PopuList gives the first and last year in which each label applied, so a party's status can change during my period. In my sample, for example, the Slovenian Democratic Party is far right from 2015, the List of Marjan Šarec is populist until 2018, SYRIZA is far left until 2015, Jobbik is far right until 2018 and Podemos is populist until 2019, so that in 2020 Podemos counts as a non-populist far-left party. In the main analysis I count only the classifications the PopuList treats as certain, and I add the borderline cases in a robustness check. A party that meets the threshold but is not listed is treated as neither populist, far right nor far left.

I link pages to the PopuList through ParlGov party identifiers. In two cases the PopuList links a party to the identifier of a different party: the Slovenian United Left (ZL) to the Social Democrats (SD), and the Romanian Social Democratic Party (PSD, borderline populist) to a small successor party. I treat SD as not populist, and I add the PSD, and the Norwegian Centre Party (borderline populist from 2017, with no ParlGov link), to the borderline check. The PopuList classifies New Slovenia (NSi) as populist and far right, which I follow but test by dropping it. From these codes I form five groups: populist radical right (populist and far right), populist radical left (populist and far left), other populists (populist only, such

as the Progress Party in Norway, SMER in Slovakia and Sinn Féin), non-populist far left (such as the French and Portuguese Communist parties and Izquierda Unida) and the rest, which I call mainstream for brevity. No party page in the sample is far right but not populist.

3.3 Size and power

Bigger parties have more followers and more engagement, and governing parties may post differently. I add the party's vote share at the most recent national parliamentary election before each post, and whether it was in the national cabinet on the day of the post, both from ParlGov (Döring and Manow 2024). Where a party ran within an alliance I use the alliance (Fidesz with the KDNP, the Portuguese Communists within the CDU, Levica within the United Left in 2014). Where ParlGov records no national result for the party before the post, mostly new parties such as Podemos before 2015, Vox before 2019 and the Brexit Party before December 2019, and some parties that ran inside alliances, I set the vote share to 0.5% and add an indicator; I check that dropping these posts does not change the result. For Switzerland, where the four largest parties share the Federal Council, I treat those parties as in government throughout.

4 Method

The unit is the post. The outcome is the logarithm of one plus the number of interactions. The main model is

$$\log(1 + y_{ipt}) = \beta \text{Populist}_{pt} + \gamma \log V_{pt} + \delta G_{pt} + \alpha_{c(p),m(t)} + \tau_{k(i)} + \varepsilon_{ipt}, \quad (1)$$

where y_{ipt} is the interactions on post i by party p at time t , Populist_{pt} indicates that the PopuList classifies the party as populist in that year, V is its last vote share (with the no-result indicator), G its government status, α a country-by-month fixed effect and τ a fixed effect for the post type (photo, link, status, native video, live video and so on). The country-by-month effects mean that each post is compared only with posts by other parties in the same country and month, which removes differences in Facebook use between countries, the growth of the platform over time, and national events. $\exp(\beta)$ is the ratio of interactions on a populist post to those on a comparable non-populist post, which I call the premium. Standard errors are clustered by page, giving 112 clusters for parties and 74 for leaders. Because the premium rests on 24 populist pages, I also run a permutation test: I reshuffle populist status across party pages within each country 2,000 times and re-estimate the premium on party-month means.

I check the result in four further ways: on party-month medians, which weight each party-month equally whatever its posting rate; with a Poisson model on raw counts, which estimates the ratio of mean interactions; with the log of page likes at posting as a control, from 2016; and on interactions per thousand page likes. For the country comparison I estimate the model separately in each of the 12 countries with at least one populist and one non-populist party page, and I also report an unadjusted version, the mean difference in log interactions between populist and other pages within country-months, with intervals from a bootstrap over parties. With between three and 13 parties per country, clustered standard errors within a single country are unreliable and probably too small, so I treat the country estimates as descriptive and combine them with a random-effects meta-analysis only as a summary.

Table 2. The populist premium on party pages. Outcome: $\log(1 + \text{interactions})$ per post, except column 4 (log interactions per thousand page likes), column 5 (interactions, Poisson) and columns 6 to 8 (party-month median interactions per post, number of posts and total interactions, logged). All models include country-by-month fixed effects; post-level models include post-type fixed effects. Standard errors clustered by page in parentheses.

	(1) Raw	(2) Controls	(3) Page likes	(4) Per like	(5) Poisson	(6) Party-month median	(7) Party-month posts	(8) Party-month total
Populist party	1.18*** (0.22)	0.92*** (0.18)	0.41** (0.13)	0.12 (0.12)	1.15*** (0.13)	0.60** (0.19)	0.27 (0.13)	0.91*** (0.26)
Multiplier	3.3×	2.5×	1.5×	1.1×	3.2×	1.8×	1.3×	2.5×
Vote share, government	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Log page likes	No	No	Yes	Outcome	No	No	No	No
Period	2010–20	2010–20	2016–20	2016–20	2010–20	2010–20	2010–20	2010–20
Observations	669,760	669,760	382,075	382,075	669,760	11,394	11,394	11,394

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Multiplier is $\exp(\beta)$. 112 party pages in 17 countries; the populist coefficient is identified from the 12 countries with both populist and other party pages. Page likes are recorded consistently from 2016.

5 Results

5.1 A large premium

Table 2 gives the main estimates. Without controls, a populist party’s post received 3.3 times the interactions of another party’s post in the same country and month. Controlling for vote share and government status, the premium is 2.5 times (95% CI 1.8 to 3.6). The Poisson estimate of the ratio of means is 3.2. Weighting each party-month equally, the median populist post received 1.8 times the interactions of the median post by another party. Populist parties also posted about 1.3 times as often (CI 1.0 to 1.7), so their total monthly interactions were 2.5 times those of other parties of the same size. In raw terms, the median populist post drew 312 interactions and the median post by another party 138. In the permutation test the observed party-month premium (0.65 log points) was larger than in all 2,000 reshuffles, whose standard deviation was 0.19 ($p < 0.001$).

5.2 Populism, radicalism and Euroscepticism

Figure 1 splits the premium by party family. Populist radical left parties had the largest premium, 5.4 times (CI 3.2 to 9.1), led by Podemos, La France insoumise, SYRIZA (until 2015), MeRA25 and Levica. Without Podemos it is 3.5 times, still the largest. The difference between the populist radical left and the populist radical right is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). Populist radical right parties had a premium of 2.3 times (CI 1.7 to 3.2) and other populists 1.5 times (CI 1.1 to 2.2). For far-left parties that are not populist I find no premium: the estimate is 0.81 times, but the interval (0.31 to 2.1) is wide, because there are only seven such pages. The contrast between populist and non-populist far-left parties is suggestive rather than decisive. It may partly reflect the age of the parties: the populist radical left pages belong mostly to new movements, while the non-populist far left is mostly old communist parties. Controlling for whether a party first contested a national election after 2010 reduces the overall populist premium only slightly, from 2.5 to 2.4 times, and new parties had higher engagement in general (1.7 times, $p = 0.06$).

Euroscepticism and populism are hard to separate, because most populist parties in the sample are

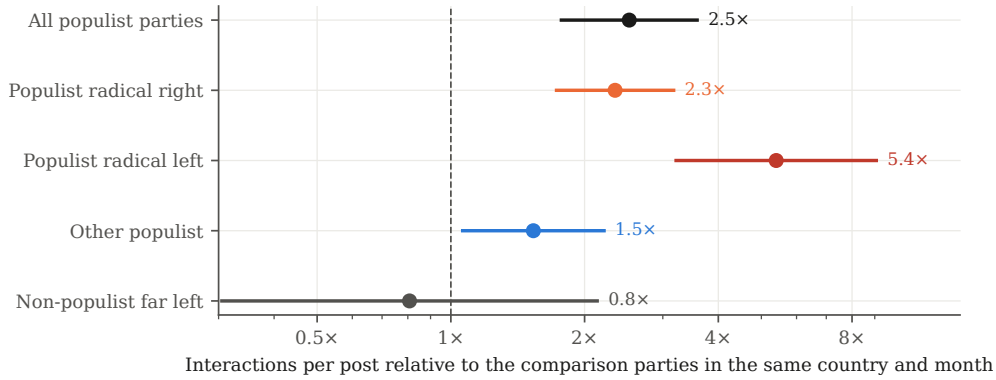


Figure 1. The premium by party family. Ratio of interactions per post to those of comparison parties in the same country and month (mainstream parties for the family rows, all non-populist parties for the top row), controlling for vote share, government status and post type, with 95% confidence intervals, log scale.

Eurosceptic. With both labels in the model the populist premium is 2.3 times ($\beta = 0.84$, SE 0.33) and the Eurosceptic coefficient is close to zero (0.10, SE 0.33). Among non-populist parties, Eurosceptic parties showed no premium either (-0.10 , SE 0.41). I find no evidence of a separate Eurosceptic premium.

5.3 Not the same everywhere

Figure 2 shows the premium country by country. Adjusted for vote share, government status and post type, it was large in Spain (Podemos and Vox, 5.0 times), the United Kingdom (UKIP and the Brexit Party, 4.5 times), Norway (the Progress Party, 3.3 times), Sweden (the Sweden Democrats, 3.0 times), Hungary (Fidesz and Jobbik, 2.6 times) and France (the National Rally, La France insoumise and Debout la France, 2.4 times). In Slovenia, Luxembourg, Slovakia and Finland the adjusted estimates are about 1.2 to 1.3 times, with intervals that include one. In Greece (0.5 times) and Switzerland (0.4 times) the estimates are below one but not significantly so. Several of these depend on a handful of parties. In Finland the only populist page is Liike Nyt, a small movement founded in 2018, because the Finns Party is missing, so the Finnish result says little about Finnish populism. In Greece the comparison is between SYRIZA, which governed from 2015 to 2019, and two small populist parties on one side, and New Democracy and the PASOK-led Movement for Change on the other. In Switzerland the unadjusted premium is 2.2 times but, with three parties, the adjustment for vote share is driven by the fact that the Swiss People's Party is the largest; the adjusted estimate is fragile.

Summarising the 12 adjusted estimates with a random-effects meta-analysis gives a pooled premium of 1.8 times (CI 1.3 to 2.6). The spread of the country estimates is much larger than their standard errors would imply ($I^2 = 90\%$), and a test that the premium is equal in all countries in the post-level model rejects equality ($\chi^2 = 85$, 11 degrees of freedom, $p < 0.001$). Both statistics treat the within-country standard errors as correct, which they probably are not with so few parties per country, so they overstate how confidently the countries differ. Still, the contrast between, say, Norway and Sweden on one hand and Finland and Luxembourg on the other is large. The answer to RQ3 is that the premium appears in most countries but is not uniform: its size depends heavily on the country and the parties in it.

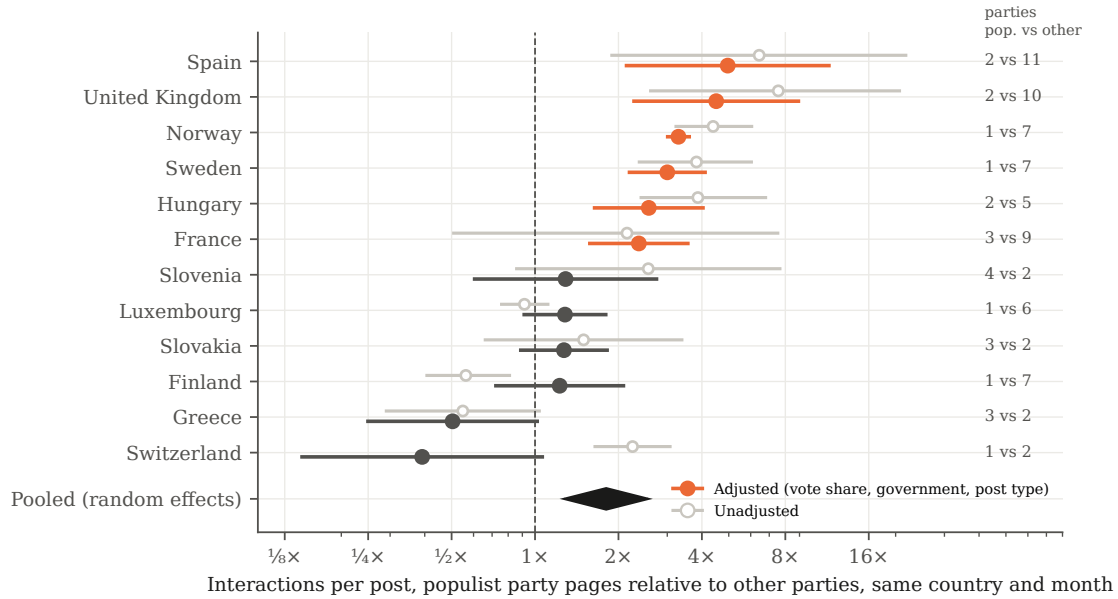


Figure 2. The premium by country. Filled markers: country-by-country estimates controlling for vote share, government status and post type, with 95% intervals from page-clustered standard errors (orange: above one; grey: includes one); these intervals are probably too narrow given the few parties per country. Open markers: unadjusted mean difference in log interactions between populist and other party pages within country-months, with 95% intervals from a bootstrap over parties; where a country has one populist page, the bootstrap reflects only variation among the other parties. The diamond is the random-effects summary of the adjusted estimates. Right: numbers of populist and other party pages.

5.4 Bigger audiences, slightly angrier

How much of the premium reflects bigger audiences? On the 2016 to 2020 posts, for which page likes are recorded, the premium is 2.6 times; holding page likes constant it falls to 1.5 times (CI 1.2 to 2.0; Table 2, column 3). Page size therefore accounts for a little under three-fifths of the premium in log terms, and a premium of about 1.5 times remains at equal page size. Measured as interactions per thousand page likes, the difference is 1.13 times and not significant (column 4), but that measure assumes interactions rise in proportion to page size, whereas the estimated elasticity is 0.69, which penalises large pages. Figure 3 shows the audience difference. In 2019, populist pages had about 1.9 times the page likes of other parties with the same vote share (log difference 0.63, SE 0.20, with country fixed effects, 108 parties). Podemos had more than 1.2 million page likes on 9.8% of the vote at the previous election, and UKIP over half a million on 1.8%. A few populist parties, notably the Swiss People's Party, had smaller pages than their vote would predict. This is a description, not a causal decomposition: a large page is partly the product of past engagement and of advertising.

The composition of engagement differed in one respect. From 2017 to 2020, angry reactions made up 4.4% of the interactions on populist posts and 2.7% on other parties' posts (Figure 4). In the fixed-effects model the difference is 2.0 percentage points (SE 0.8). The shares of likes, shares and comments were not significantly different overall, and sad reactions were slightly less common. The extra anger is of similar size in each populist group (1.8 to 3.0 points; significant for the radical left and other populists), and the non-populist far left has a similar point estimate (2.2, SE 1.3). The far left, populist or not, also had a higher proportion of shares: 4.4 points (SE 1.8) for the populist radical left and 13.2 points (SE 2.0) for the non-populist far left.

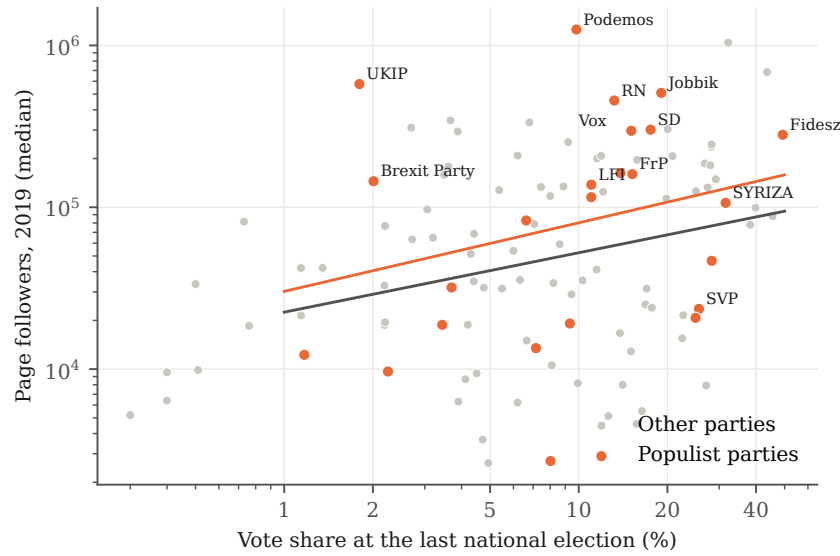


Figure 3. Page likes against vote share, party pages in 2019. Median page likes across each party’s 2019 posts against its vote share at the previous national election, log scales. Lines are least-squares fits for populist and other parties.

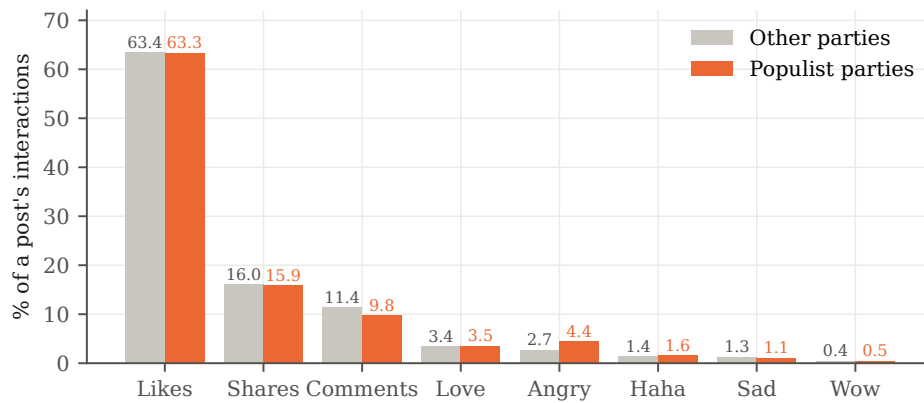


Figure 4. What engagement consisted of, 2017 to 2020. Mean percentage of each post’s interactions by type, party pages.

5.5 Government

Populist parties had a smaller premium while in government. In opposition, a populist post received 2.8 times the interactions of a comparable post (CI 1.9 to 4.1); in government, 1.7 times (CI 1.1 to 2.8), as Figure 5 shows. The difference between the two (-0.46 log points, SE 0.29, $p = 0.12$) is not statistically significant. Ten populist party pages spent some of the period in government, among them Fidesz, SMER, SYRIZA, the Progress Party and the Swiss People’s Party; four (OL’aNO, Sme rodina, the Slovenian Democratic Party and NSi) entered government only in 2020. The comparison is mostly between parties. When the same party moves in or out of government, with page fixed effects, government lowers engagement for all parties a little (-0.15 , SE 0.08), and the extra change for populists is small and not significant ($+0.15$, SE 0.21). Dropping Switzerland, whose collegial government is unlike the others, gives the same pattern. Comparing populists that never governed in the period with those that did gives a positive but non-significant difference (0.27, SE 0.35). The evidence that government reduces the premium is weak.

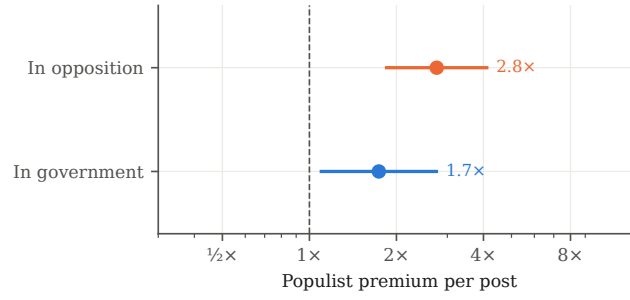


Figure 5. The premium for populist parties in opposition and in government, with 95% confidence intervals, controlling for vote share and post type, country-by-month fixed effects.

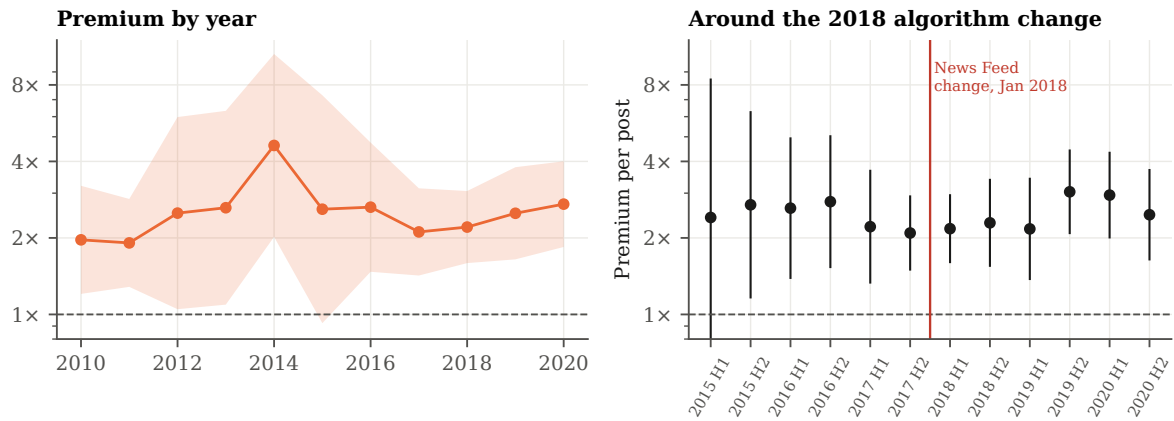


Figure 6. The premium over time. Left: by year, 2010 to 2020, with 95% confidence band. Right: by half-year, 2015 to 2020, with the January 2018 News Feed change marked. Both with controls and country-by-month fixed effects.

5.6 Over time and the 2018 algorithm change

The premium was present in every year (Figure 6, left). It was about 2.0 times in 2010 and 2011, peaked at 4.6 times in 2014, the year of the European elections, and was between 2.1 and 2.7 times from 2017 to 2020. The right panel shows it by half-year from 2015, with the January 2018 change marked. There is no visible break: the premium was 2.1 times in the second half of 2017 and 2.2 times in the first half of 2018. In the 18 months on either side of the change the interaction between populism and the post-change period is -0.06 (SE 0.21), and with page fixed effects, which compare each party with itself, it is $+0.06$ (SE 0.19). The confidence interval on the change runs from a fall of about a third to a rise of about two-fifths, so moderate changes cannot be ruled out, but there is no sign that the News Feed change widened the gap between populist and other parties' pages.

5.7 Leaders

The pattern repeats for party leaders. Populist leaders such as Viktor Orbán, Nigel Farage, Jimmie Åkesson, Siv Jensen, Pablo Iglesias and Kristian Thulesen Dahl received about 2.5 times the interactions per post of other leaders in the same country and month ($\beta = 0.93$, SE 0.33; 186,910 posts after dropping 29 that are alone in their fixed-effect cell). Once page likes are controlled, from 2016, the leader premium disappears ($\beta = 0.03$, SE 0.21). For leaders, the premium is almost entirely a matter of audience size.

5.8 Robustness

The party premium stays between 2.2 and 2.8 times in each of the following checks: adding borderline PopuList classifications, including the Romanian PSD and the Norwegian Centre Party (2.2); dropping NSi (2.6); dropping Hungary (2.8); dropping 2020 (2.5); dropping videos (2.4); controlling for the length of the post text (2.6); dropping posts without a recorded vote share (2.5); keeping only parties that won at least 5% at an election in the period, which drops regional and small parties (2.2, 80 pages); and clustering by country instead of page (2.5, SE 0.17). Dropping one country at a time gives premiums between 2.2 (without Spain) and 2.8 times (without Hungary or Greece). The ranking of party families does not change when I drop Podemos, the United Kingdom or Spain.

6 Discussion

Populist parties did win on Facebook in the decade before 2020, in the narrow sense that their posts drew far more interactions than those of other parties of similar size. Three results qualify the claim.

First, the premium follows populism more than radicalism or Euroscepticism. Far-left parties that are not populist showed no premium, and populist parties of the left showed the largest. That fits the view that the people-versus-elite frame is what travels on social media (Engesser et al. 2017; Bene et al. 2022), though with seven non-populist far-left pages, and with populist left parties that are mostly new, the evidence is suggestive.

Second, more than half of the premium is audience. Populist parties built bigger pages than their votes would predict, and at equal page size they kept a smaller premium of about 1.5 times, with more anger. A page's audience is not the same as its electorate: Podemos and UKIP had very large pages relative to their votes, and the pages of governing populists such as the Swiss People's Party were small relative to theirs.

Third, the premium is not uniform. It is large in some countries, undetectable in others, and possibly smaller for parties in government. Findings from the largest and most visible cases, which in these data are the Spanish, British, Scandinavian and Hungarian ones, should not be assumed to hold elsewhere.

The limits are important. The pages are those in the CrowdTangle lists I built in 2020; they are not a census, and some of the most important populist and mainstream parties are missing (Appendix Table 3). Interactions are not reach: CrowdTangle does not record how many people saw a post, and engagement can be inflated by a small number of very active users or by coordinated accounts. Page likes are only recorded consistently from 2016, so the audience comparison covers the second half of the period. The PopuList is an expert classification at the party level and does not measure how populist each post was; some of its codings, such as New Slovenia, are open to argument, and I found two linking errors. Country estimates rest on between three and 13 parties and are imprecise. Finally, CrowdTangle's terms do not allow the raw posts to be shared, and the tool itself closed in 2024, so this is a historical dataset that cannot easily be rebuilt.

7 Conclusion

Across the 12 European countries in which the comparison is possible, from 2010 to 2020, the posts of populist parties drew about 2.5 times the engagement of comparable posts by other parties. The premium

was largest for the populist left, was more than half a matter of bigger audiences, and came with more anger. It varied a great deal between countries and showed no detectable change when Facebook changed its News Feed in 2018. A useful next step would be to combine post-level measures of populist content with the party-level classification used here, to separate what populist parties say from who follows them.

Data and code

The posts were exported from CrowdTangle in October 2020. CrowdTangle's terms do not permit sharing the raw posts. The analysis code, the list of pages with their PopuList and ParlGov codes, and party-month aggregate data are available from the author.

Provenance and AI use

The data were exported from CrowdTangle in October 2020 for my doctoral research. This paper builds on my doctoral thesis (Hotham 2021). The analysis and writing were completed in 2026.

The analysis code and drafts of the text were prepared with the assistance of an AI system (Claude, by Anthropic), which was also used to review drafts. I checked the analysis and the text and take responsibility for both.

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A Parties missing from the exports

Table 3. Parties with no page in the sample, in the 15 countries with party pages where at least one is missing. Left: parties the PopuList classifies as populist, far right or far left at some point from 2010 to 2020 and that won at least 2% at a national election. Right: other parties that won at least 5% at a national election and were active in 2010 to 2020. ParlGov abbreviations; vote thresholds use the largest result ParlGov records for the party.

Country	Populist, far right or far left	Other parties
Switzerland	PdA	KK/CVP; Grue; GPL-PVL; BDP
Germany	AfD; Rep	SPD; B90/Gru; FDP
Spain		CEP; CiU
Finland	SIP	
France		PR; d-droite
Greece	KKE; ANEL; LS-CA; LAOS; LEIPE	DIMAR; TP
Hungary	FKgP; MHM; MMP	MDF; KDNP
Ireland	SP	FF; FG; Lab; Green
Lithuania	TT-LDP; DK; LCP; LLS; LTS	DP; LiCS; LP; LLRA
Luxembourg	KPL	
Norway	RV	
Portugal	CH	CDS-PP; BE; MPT
Romania	PRM; PP-DD; AUR; PMP; PRU	PD-L; UDMR; PLRIALDE
Slovakia	HZDS; SNS; ANO; LsNS; KSS; V	KDH; SDKU-DS; MK; MH; PS; OKS; S
Slovenia	SNS	LDS; SMC; LZJ-PS; SLS; V; ZS; DL; ZaAB